

28.02.2013 | Which space for asylum in Tunisia?

Pressrelease by the Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights

During the evening hours of February 27th about thirty refugees of Eritrean nationality, including six women and a child, went to the headquarters of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Zarzis in the south of Tunisia. They are part of a group of “boat people” who arrived from Libya in September 2012. They were initially accommodated at a youth centre in Zarzis and entered an integration programme organised by the red crescent in Tunisia. Despite the fact that they were recognised as refugees by the UNHCR, they were denied access to the resettlement programme. It allows people to move to a country with a functioning asylum system and adequate safety. They were told that the resettlement programme which existed in Tunisia was terminated and not accessible to anybody who arrived after December 2011.

The refugees demand access to the resettlement programme, in order to be protected by a country with a functioning asylum system. Effectively the refugee status they were awarded by the UNHCR does not grant them any rights as Tunisia does not currently have laws concerning asylum procedures. What's more is that the refugees denounce the fact that the local integration programme does not allow them to live under adequate conditions. According to the refugees' testimonies they are constantly threatened by racist violence, which may occur during their training or while at work. Which is why they refuse to integrate themselves in Tunisia which to them represents a country that rejects them and by which they feel threatened.

Facing the mobilisation of these refugees, the Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights (FTDES) attests that the UNHCR's efforts to integrate refugees in Tunisia have failed. The FTDES considers the “integration” policy an attempt by the European Union to externalise asylum procedures for refugees who Western governments could not find any solutions for to Tunisia. The FTDES also condemns the fact that these integration programmes were initiated without offering a legal status to the people affected by it in Tunisia, thus leaving them disenfranchised. The FTDES appeals to the UNHCR and the respective governments to assume their responsibilities in order to protect these political refugees who depend on international protection. The FTDES reiterates their request to the UNHCR concerning all refugees: to allow them access to the resettlement programme so they can leave Tunisia and obtain effective protection by countries that do have an asylum system. Ultimately the FTDES appeals to the entire Tunisian civil society to take a stand in favour of the refugees demands and to show their solidarity.